

HISTORIAN

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OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

June 1998

APRIL HAPPENINGS

The June meeting of the Hancock County Historical Society will be held at noon on Thursday, June 18 at the Kate Lobrano House, 108 Cue Street, Bay Saint Louis.

Guest speaker will be Ken Kocher from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Mr. Kocher will discuss local preservation, a very timely and useful subject, since we are presently writing a preservation ordinance which the city of Bay Saint Louis will, hopefully, adopt.

Call 467-4090 for luncheon reservations at \$6.00. Please call early to assure your reservation and to help us plan seating.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

I suppose you have already read in one of the more frequently published local papers that we bade bye-bye to Benny last week. More literally, our friends at the Sea Coast Echo and the Sun Herald reported that we attended a bon voyage party on June 2nd for the clay model of Jean Baptiste LeMoyne, Sieur d'Bienville. The model has now been driven to the foundry in New York state by its sculptor, Mary Davidson. She had taken her model of big brother, d'Iberville to the foundry months ago, and she will bring the bronze d'Iberville with her when she returns, leaving d'Bienville to be cast. So much for mother's admonition to come home with the same guy you went off with.

The statue looks wonderful. He is
See President on page 3



Thomas Shields
1783 - 1827

This photographic likeness of Thomas Shields is a greatly enlarged image taken from a hand painted lapel pin that belonged to his wife.

The photograph was provided to us by Maureen Murphy Singleton of Houston, Texas.

Miss Singleton is a great-great-granddaughter of Thomas Shields.

THOMAS SHIELDS 1783-1827

From 1699 until 1803, the settlement on the west bank of the Bay of St. Louis was known as Bay St. Louis. The land had been a Spanish land grant to Constantin Tardil in 1789. Since Tardil did not occupy the site, it was awarded to Thomas Shields in 1790. It is known that a Thomas Shields occupied it in 1800. Historians believe this was the father of the man for whom the settlement was later named, since the son was only age seven at the time.

Shields married Ellen Blanchard Ker in 1816 at Shieldsboro/Bay St. Louis. The town was known then by both names. While Shields owned a home on

Front Street at the site of today's Chessy's Art and Antiques, he spent little time here. According to the 1820 Census, Shields and his family lived in St. Tammany Parish, La., and by 1823 were residents of New Orleans.

In 1818 Shieldsboro was officially designated a town by that name and remained so until 1875 when the legislature changed it to Bay St. Louis.

According to *American State Papers*, it was recorded in 1820 that Congress declined to ratify the Spanish land grant awarded to Shields. Minor disputes over the title continued until the 1920s when the land was awarded to a resort complex. Our search failed to uncover the location of this complex. But it is known that no heirs claimed the land.

The name of Shields lives on in local descendants as well as historical references and a mini-shopping center called Shieldsboro Square. Also, during World War II, a Navy destroyer was christened Purser Shields. In his day, Shields served as Purser of the Navy in New Orleans.

Born in Delaware, Shields joined the U.S. Navy in 1804 as a midshipman and by 1808 he was stationed in Baltimore angling for a purser job. He plied important people with letters pleading for their support.

In a letter to Gabriel Duvall, Comptroller of the Navy, Shields cited "the unavoidable expenses which I am compelled to be at, through the highness of boarding &c, (etc.) and my inability to meet it by any other means but that arising from my slender pay as midshipman, induces me to solicit your influence in the opportunity so offered."

In another plea: "I have heretofore studiously avoided any recurrence to the subject of promotions. It is however, My Dear Sir, grating to see juniors wearing Epaullets. Mr. Rogers who is recruiting in this station is one of those. May I not calculate on your friendship?"

His campaign succeeded. In April of 1812 his commission was confirmed by the U.S. Senate, and Shields was dispatched to New Orleans to serve as purser, the only shore-based position he was to hold during his Navy career except a brief wartime sortie.

The Battle of Lake Borgne in the War of 1812 found Shields aboard ship together with Dr. R. Morrell, Surgeon of the Navy, sent by Gen. Patterson with a flag of truce to negotiate the freedom of American prisoners held on British gunboats. The British refused the request, and Shields and Morrell returned to New Orleans. On Jan. 19, 1815, Shields left the city with a few well-armed boats to join the fray in Lake Borgne. The next day he boarded a British ship and captured its 40-member crew. The following day he captured a transport boat and a 10-ton schooner and three small boats.

In 1818, Shields was summoned to Washington to "render his accounts from 1811 to 1818. It is presumed he can account for the full amount standing in his debt of \$98,514.30. The amount of his pay since March 1821 is to be deducted from this balance."

In 1823 Shields was granted a nine-month leave of absence to go to Honduras to "pursue a claim, the proceeds of which he wanted to apply to liquidation of his accounts."

But in September 1828, the navy reported his debt at \$98,417.30 even though in April 1827, Shields was given a twelve-month leave to go to Mexico. The navy's records note "the trip to Mexico has the same purpose as the one to Honduras because of having been unable to go assay on account of his finances."

In 1826, responding to a request for information for a Shields Memorial, R. Y. Hayne, Chairman of the Senate-Committee of Naval Affairs, wrote: "It appears by the files of this Office that in the settlement of Mr. Shields's accounts in 1821, his own statement exhibited a balance due to the United States of \$81,047.57. In this statement, however, certain errors existed and certain sums were charged by Mr. Shields which according to the rules of Settlement of this office were not allowed, and which raise the balance as stated to be \$98,314.30. The difference between these two sums is principally made up of overpayments to dead men and deserters, and of stores lost by conflagration and capture by the British during the late war. Besides these two principal items, there are rejected charges for clerk hire, travelling expenses and house rent, making in the whole, the sum of \$16,395.54 for which, perhaps, though the strict rules of Law by which this office is governed, in the settlement of accounts, prohibit any allowance, Mr. Shields is entitled upon the principals of Equity to a credit. Should this sum be allowed to him, the balance against him will be reduced to \$81,918.76. No other demands [exist] for credit on the part of Mr. Shields."

The chairman also felt that some

of Shields's problems could result from paying for provisions out of his own pocket.

"...during the war, public agents and disbursing officers found it extremely difficult to procure either funds or credit on their public responsibilities and unless their private means were resorted to, the public service was much inconvenienced," Hayne wrote. "At this period Mr. Shields was a man of fortune and of extensive credit, with high and chivalric feelings of patriotism, which would have led him to have used his own pecuniary resources, with the same promptitude and high minded carelessness of forms, with which he had actually hazarded his life, when he thought the interests of his country required it.

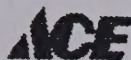
"The untarnished reputation of Mr. Shields for moral integrity forbids the suspicion that any part of the large balance against him could have accrued from an illegal or improper diversion of the public funds to his own use or emolument. But it is highly probable that much of it may have arisen from the neglect, dishonesty, or wastefulness of those Subordinate Agents to whom he was compelled to entrust the management of his concerns...several officers who were then serving on that station, the Pursers, Stewards and Agents were frequently called upon to perform Military duty and that while they were so engaged...the warehouses and stores in which provisions and other public effects were deposited, were left without protection and exposed to pillage and depredation. It cannot be doubted that public property to a large amount, with which Mr. Shields was charged and is now held responsible, was thus wasted or stolen without slightest ground of imputation resting either upon his integrity or vigilance."

In 1822 the Secretary of the Navy authorized a payment to Shields of \$1,693.10 to cover the loss "occasioned by burning the public storehouse at the Bay of St. Louis by order of Lt. Jones, commanding the naval force of the U.S. stationed at that point during the invasion of the enemy in the winter of 1814.

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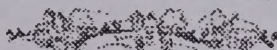
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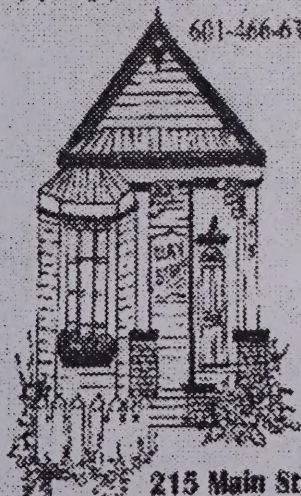
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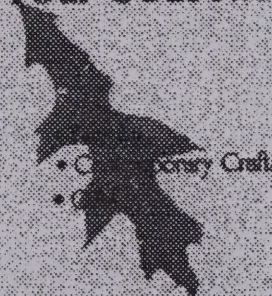
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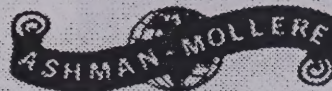
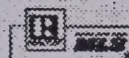
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